

The man of Average by Myley

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Summary: Twenty-five years after the events with the Upside Down, Mike and Will are living quite different lives. One is a porn star, the other stuck in a loveless marriage. Shock comes when Nathaniel, Mike's fifteen year-old son and spitting image of Mike at the same age when he and Will were lovebirds, suddenly confesses unrequited feelings for Will, throwing him into an ocean of confusion

The man of Average

2011 - Hawkins

Mike Wheeler was a man of average, born and raised in the small, provincial town of Hawkins, Indiana to a traditional nuclear American family with his parents and two sisters. They were all grown now, his sisters living their life in Seattle and San Diego and parents gone to Florida. His childhood friends had left too, years ago, only returning occasionally to visit their aging folks. And now, it was just Mike and his own nuclear family. He had lived in the city for a while, during his College years, until he met a young woman named Jezebel Markowski, an American girl from Polish descent he married at twenty five after she'd gotten pregnant with their unexpected son. And they moved from the city back to Hawkins, in his parents' house that he inherited for the occasion. And just like that, Mike's life was sealed. Two years later, they had a daughter and four years after that, another one, completing the perfect American family painting of mommy, daddy and their three adorable cherubs.

Jezebel was a stay-at-home mom and Mike worked as a clerk in a printing company. Not the most exciting of jobs but it paid the bills and provided food for the whole family which was all that was needed, really.

He didn't hate his life. Not really. Not completely. Sure, it wasn't exciting. Younger, he dreamed of becoming a famous writer, turning his campaigns into full fledged stories that would captivate crowds. He wanted to be the new Tolkien. The new Tolkien! Thirty years later, he laughed at his own candid naivety. He wanted to live on a boat too, with only love and sun and water as fuel. You're stupid like that when you're twenty and he was no different.

Now, at forty, all his childhood dreams had long been buried and forsaken. He couldn't stay idle with a child coming and selling printers was a mature job, an adult job, something real and responsible. And his house was clean and homey. Jezebel was good at this kind of thing. And she always wore floral dresses with her blond hair tied in a loose bun.

He sniffled, securing his bag of groceries under his arm and opened the car with the other. Looking absentmindedly at his surroundings, his eyes fell on the facade of the bookstore just across the street and he froze. Among the books and magazines on display, there was the new edition of People magazine.

The title read, "WILL BYERS, THE CONQUEROR, HOW HE REVOLUTIONIZED THE PORN INDUSTRY."

His heart sunk in his chest. Will Byers was his best friend from childhood, among other things. They had grown up together in this small town before Will brutally moved to Chicago with his mother and siblings when he was fourteen. Now, his best friend, among other things, and Godfather of his elder daughter, was a porn star! If someone had told him decades prior that shy, cute little Will would end up fucking men in front a camera and pose naked in magazines for a million dollars, he wouldn't have believed them! This just wouldn't have made any sense. And yet. Will was a porn star. A Superstar even. And it was damn awkward. He had never watched any of Will's movies per se. He had roamed the Internet sometimes, out of boredom and curiosity, falling across a video of Will being sucked off in oil, and it had made him uncomfortable as hell. A bit grossed out too. The worst was visiting him on set. Oh boy, that was unpleasant. And Mike avoided it unless he didn't have a choice, like this one time he had to let baby Nate to Will's care because Jezebel was having post birth complications and Mike had to go to work to pay for the hospital bill.

Bursting in the studio with a crying baby and crossing rooms full of naked men and women doing all sorts of sexual activities everywhere only to find his best friend naked, his cock buried in a stranger's ass with a camera right on them and a guy on a chair, shouting "Try another angle honey, so we can see your lovely cock better!" was a most awkward, most surreal experience he'd ever lived and never wanted to reproduce. When he told his wife he'd left their two weeks old infant on a porn set, she yelled at him, said it was going to leave their child traumatized and scarred. Fifteen years later, Nate didn't look traumatized or scarred. He was a polite and well behaved kid, did good in school, had healthy friends. And most importantly, he wasn't interested in dating, which was a very, very good point as far

as his religious mom was concerned. He didn't seem to be interested in girls or boys - Mike wouldn't have cared if it were the case - and spent his days reading and playing video games. And he loved Will. All his kids did. Will was like a surrogate dad to them and Mike was glad. Will was very important to him, after all.

Jezebel had her reservations. She disapproved of his job and lifestyle, among other things, but she was clever enough to know not to interfere in her husband and his best friend's complicated relationship. And she knew Will was a good and healthy man, dedicating his life to helping young people.

He blinked, swallowing on empty, his eyes still glued on the magazine cover.

It was a photo of Will clothed (for once), wearing a revealing black shirt that stuck to his toned body, showing glimpses of skin and tattoos from its designed holes. His bronze-colored hair was disheveled in an elaborated mess, his hand holding his head with a cigarette between two fingers, his pink, full lips, parted to expire a round of smoke. It wasn't fully sexual but it still was a very erotic photo. Inviting. Sinful. But then again, Will was sin incarnated. And it made Mike's heart hammer in his chest and ears buzz, oblivious to the rest of the world.

He sucked in a deep breath, forcing unsolicited memories away. Those days were long gone. He wasn't bitter. Hewasn't. He had chosen this life. It was for the best, the right - mature - thing to do! He sighed, still looking at Will's flawless beauty. He was still as breathtakingly gorgeous as when he was twenty. And it wasn't even that photoshopped. Mike knew the guy in real life, after all. Will was flawless naturally. And Mike, with his growing baldness, beer belly and stress wrinkles paled in comparison. He was far from the dark-haired tantalizing ephēbe he used to be. Really far... He barely recognized himself anymore.

He shook his head. This wasn't the moment to reflect and wallow in self-pity. He was passed forty and didn't have Will's money. He didn't have time to go to the gym or get a personal coach. He didn't have time to do yoga, diet and care for himself. He worked twelve hours a day for minimum wage and had three kids to look after! Will didn't.

Will spent his days soaked in massage oil with his cock constantly warmed up!

In opposition, Mike had sex maybe once or twice a month, at best! And most of the time an unsatisfactory quickie before sleep in the dark.

Clearly, they lived quite different lives.

He sighed to himself. Will was coming over for dinner later that evening and he was happy to see him. He was coming with his boyfriend Ravi, a nice guy. A porn actor too. Not as famous as Will but they still shot a lot of sextapes together and Ravi was known enough in the gay porn scene. They had been together for ten years but didn't have any children. Will said it was for the best, given their job and life. He didn't want his kid to be under media scrutiny. This was a cruel world after all and Mike could only agree with Will, even if it was a waste. Will would have made a wonderful dad.

He frowned, clearing his thoughts, and pushed the bag of groceries in the back seat of the car before hopping in and turning the engine, Will's photo cover following him from the corner of his eye down the street.

He made it home in minutes, calling for his wife as he entered their house. It hadn't changed much from when he was a kid himself. The furniture was mostly the same, with the same old tattered couch and white carpet. The only things that did change were the new, modern flat TV screen, a new minibar, and pictures of his wife and children hanging on the walls and the fireplace. It smelled the same too. Like old cracking wood and dust.

Jezebel joined him in the hall, a wooden fork in hand, pink apron secured around her hips. She was a petite woman with small curves and long wavy blond hair.

"Did you find the chicken?" she asked in her high-pitched voice.

"I found breast plates," he answered, taking them from the bag. "Is this what you wanted?"

She rolled her eyes, eyeing the meat package with a pout of disgust and annoyance.

"I told you to take a full organic chicken! I'm not going to serve Will and Ravi cheap chicken breast plates! They're probably coming with an extravagant dessert or bottle of wine!" she put her hands on her hips, something she always did when she was upset, "Breast plates! Really, Mike?!"

Mike sighed, already feeling tired, "Well, I couldn't find your organic chicken!" he said, removing his jacket that he hang on the coat-hanger by the door.

"Did you just look?" she insisted.

"Yes, yes I did! I searched every alley. I couldn't find anything. There was only that!"

She huffed, looking into the bag, shaking her head disapprovingly before disappearing with it in the kitchen, mumbling to herself words he couldn't decipher. He rolled his eyes, glad for the returned silence. At the same moment, Julie, his seven year-old daughter came running down the stairs and jumped in his arms happily.

"Daddy!"

"Hey sweetie!" he replied, adjusting his grip so that she wouldn't fall, "How was your day?"

"I did that for Will," she exclaimed, showing him a sort of necklace she had made herself with pearls.

"It's beautiful, sweet pea. Will is going to love it."

Her face broke into a huge, toothless smile. He put her down with a small grimace of muscle fatigue. He was getting too old for that.

"There's one for Ravi too."

"That's good. He's gonna love it."

Her smile widened and she disappeared into the lounge, jumping on

the sofa with her homemade necklaces.

Jezebel's voice rose from the kitchen.

"Mike?" she called, "Can you do the laundry?"

He sighed. She wasn't waiting for an answer and he knew it. He sniffled and climbed up the stairs to the bathroom. The hamper was full. His shoulders fell and he pulled on the string to remove the bag from the basket, enclosing the dirty clothes in before moving to his kids' rooms in search of more piles he knew he'd find there.

Nate's room - his old room - was always very clean and he only found a jacket on his desk chair that he left there. He didn't find anything in Julie's room either. She was messy but she did put her clothes in the hamper everyday. Shelley's however was another story. Even at almost thirteen she still didn't know how to clean. It was driving Jezebel insane! He sighed, staring at the clothes, dolls, cushions and books scattered all over the room. He took a few dolls and set them back in the trunk, books on the shelves, and pushed the clothes into the bag he was holding, the dust making him cough. Something shiny suddenly caught his attention on the bed and he frowned, looking harder. It was a magazine, torn at the corners, its cover half hidden by the bed sheet. He removed it with a gesture of his hand and sucked in a deep breath. It was the same magazine he had seen on display at the bookstore. His frown deepened. He put the bag of clothes down and took the magazine with trembling fingers. He loved Will but he didn't like the idea of a magazine with pictures of him half naked in his daughter's room.

The magazine easily opened on a double page of Will, as if used to being parted there. It was an interview with text and pictures. On most of them, Will was shirtless, his toned and tattooed torso in full view. He was smoking a cigarette, playing with his hair. The pictures were beautiful. But then again, Will was beautiful, with his golden skin and eyes so green they could have damned souls.

"I want people to be safe and happy," an extract of the interview read.

He skimmed over the article. Will was talking about his activism and approach to sex and society. He was also talking about himself and

his life.

"I never wanted to be a porn star! It was all chance! If you had told me years ago that I would end up in Porn, I would have been disgusted and probably called you crazy!"

Mike swallowed, looking at Will, remembering.

"Porn made me. It revealed me to myself."

He remembered the words, the arguments. He remembered Will's refusal to listen. He remembered the first time Will told him he'd found a new job to pay for his studies. Something fun, he said, and Mike couldn't have disagreed more.

His eyes fell on a paragraph about his fights against teen pornography.

"I arrived at the studio and there was this name on the board that I didn't know. When I went on set, there was a boy - clearly underaged - waiting, already naked. I was supposed to fuck him. And when I asked the director how old this boy was, he told me that it didn't matter. It did. It really did. Teenagers have no place in the industry. I don't understand how can any adult find that hot. It's disgusting and I fear for those guy's children. There's something inherently wrong in the way we diabolize sex and fantasize on youth."

Mike smiled. Will was the strongest person he knew and he fought hard for his convictions. He had done so much for teenagers, especially for queer ones. He intervened in schools to educate about safe sex, gave conferences, had a YouTube channel where he posted educational videos on sexuality, consent and gender equality. He also had a mailbox teenagers could use for advice and he knew Will always answered. He helped kids victims of rape and harassment, had even founded an association so they could find a temporary shelter. He was a great person. And Mike truly admired him.

His chest heaved with a surge of emotion as he touched one of the pictures, tracing the curves of Will's beautiful face fondly.

"Dad?"

The voice forced him back to reality and he turned to see his daughter standing in the doorway, her lips extended in a grimace of confusion, showing her braces. She looked like Nancy, with her long chestnut hair. But she had her mother's nose.

"What are you doing in my room?" she asked.

He let the magazine fall against his side, taking a breath to regain composure.

"I'm doing the laundry. And this is not a room. This is a vortex of entropy."

She rolled her eyes, "Whatever! Don't be in my room!"

He gave her a pointed look, lifting the magazine up again for her to see.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

She shrugged, "Why do you care?"

He sighed. Teenagers. How was he supposed to say it? It was so awkward. Things were a lot easier when their only concern was to run down the stairs on a skateboard.

"Look, Shelley," he began, scratching his head to find appropriate words, "I'm not mad or anything. You can read the magazines you want. Just, please tell me you didn't buy it because Will is in it? I mean, I wouldn't be... mad... if you did. Just, he's your godfather... So, it's kind of... you know," he explained painfully with a grimace of embarrassment.

"Ew, dad! Gross! He's old!" she answered, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"Well, for you maybe. But he's not that old!" Mike said, not appreciating being called old indirectly. They were the same age after all.

"Still dad, it's gross! I just wanted to read the article on Nina Dobrev. She plays in the Vampire Diaries and I love her."

He furrowed his brow, looking at the cover with confusion. It did mention an article on Vampire Diaries page 16. He swallowed, feeling stupid.

"Oh."

"Can you please go now?" his daughter asked impatiently.

He snapped back to his senses and nodded, his hand tightening around the bag, heading back toward the corridor. She closed the door behind him and he stayed unmoving for a few seconds, thoughts racing in his head before climbing down the stairs to the laundry room.

He joined his wife in the kitchen half an hour later, leaving the dirty clothes to the care of the washing machine. She was already preparing dinner.

"What are you making?"

"Roasted chicken and potatoes," she turned to him, "They eat potatoes, right? I know they're both super annoying with their diet."

Mike rolled his eyes, "Yes, they eat potatoes!"

He took a beer from the fridge.

"A beer?" she asked with a frown, "Really, Mike?"

He shrugged, uncapping the bottle.

"You put on weight," she said, eyeing him from head to toe with a pout, "Will and Ravi are annoying with their diet but you should listen to them a bit more! At least, they look good!"

"They're porn stars! Of course they're gonna look good! I don't have thousands of guys jerking off on my picture! So what's the point?!" he took a sip from his beer.

She looked at him with squinted eyes, hands on her hips.

"But you do have a wife who wants to be with a man. Not an ape!"

He rolled his eyes, "I'm not that fat!"

"You're not fat but you have a few pounds to shed! And drinking beer isn't going to help!"

He shrugged, lips clamping the bottle neck, sucking on the bitter liquid absentmindedly.

"Where is Nate?" he suddenly asked, looking around him as if the utensils and roasting potatoes held all the answers, "He should be home by now."

"He's with his friend Jessie. They had a project to work on."

Mike frowned, thinking. He wanted to ask the question. But he knew Jezebel wouldn't be receptive and he was too tired to fight. He took a long sip of his beer, watching her put the chicken breasts in the oven.

"Don't look at me like that," she said, annoyed, "Set the table!"

He sighed and nodded, dragging his feet to the cabinet, his lips glued to his beer. He grabbed a couple of plates from the shelves, the ones they used all the time, plain and white, when Jezebel stopped him with a screech.

"Not those ones!"

His hand stilled on the third plate and he swallowed back a sigh.

"Take your mom's!" she said.

He frowned, opening his mouth in confusion.

"Really?"

"Yes. Really," she answered, returning to her chicken.

He rolled his eyes, putting the plates he was holding back on their shelf.

"It's ridiculous," he muttered, "They're porn stars. Not Kings!"

"And yet Will's jeans are more expensive than this whole house. I

don't want us to pass for poverty-stricken slobs!"

"We're not poverty-stricken! We earn like an average American family!"

"With those plates you were gonna use? It would have been a night at the Wheelers by Charles Dickens! I'm already serving them food for the poor, make at least an effort on the presentation!"

"Ridiculous!" he mumbled again, finishing the last of his beer before crossing the arch to the dining room.

It was always the same! Whenever Will and Ravi visited, she always had to make a scene! Now it was the food, but later it would be their appearance and the cleaning of the house to the gutter. The same insufferable drama for the past fifteen years. He shook his head to himself, opening the doors of the china cabinet and took a pile of the hand painted plates he had inherited from his great grandmother. They only used them for special occasions. Christmas, birthdays, weddings. And when Will and Ravi came. So approximately four times a year.

Still annoyed by his wife's antics, he began to set the table, sniffing and looking at himself. Yes, he had taken a few pounds. He knew that. And so what? It's not like he had anyone to impress anymore.

The doorbell chimed a bit after 7 and Mike rushed to open. He was overexcited, way more than a forty year-old married man should have been seeing his childhood friend and he knew it. Not that he cared. He hadn't seen Will in more than three months and he missed him dearly. He tore the door from its hinges impatiently and a man appeared in the frame. A beautiful man, ageless, with bronze-colored hair and sparkling green eyes. He was smiling at Mike, flashing perfectly white teeth and Mike felt his heart sink to the bottom of his stomach. He swallowed the gulp stuck in his throat for hours and enclosed the man in an embrace of steel, pressing their bodies together.

"I've missed you so much," he whispered, rubbing his cheek against Will's like two animals from the same pack recognizing each other.

Will hugged him back, his hands touching his back.

"Me too," he whispered.

The sound of heels pushed them apart. Jezebel was looking at them from the corner with the expression of a hawk. She was wearing the black dress she always wore to go with the china plates, her blond hair loose, eyes and lips colored with light makeup.

"Hi Will," she said softly.

"Hi Jezebel."

They hugged.

"Are you alone?" she asked, pulling away.

"Ravi's coming. He just had something to do before. He'll be here soon," he produced a bottle from his side, "Here."

It was a French wine. And just by its look and date, Mike knew this wasn't a bottle they could have afforded even after a year of saving. Something Jezebel would pester him endlessly with.

"Thank you, Will."

Will removed his jacket and put it next to Mike's and Mike swallowed. He was dressed in casual, a simple blue shirt and jeans that made quite the contrast with Jezebel's reception dress and Mike's washed out suit. And yet, even in such a modest outfit, Will looked classier than both of them which wasn't surprising from someone who could earn gazillions of dollars only naked. He was taken from his thoughts by a sudden burst of thunder that roared through the hall, making the walls tremble. Turning to check behind him, he saw that the thunder had chestnut braided hair and jumped from the last stair right onto Will.

"Will!"

"Hey, Julie!" he lifted her up, making her spin and she giggled. Mike smiled in spite of himself, "How are you doing, my little darling?"

"Good!" she said laughing, her arms in the air as if pretending to be a plane.

Will set her back on her feet and she handed him the necklace, pushing it into his face.

"I made that for you!" she said proudly, "There's one for Ravi too. My teacher said that I shouldn't be making necklaces for men because necklaces are for girls but since you're gay and you kiss boys I supposed it's kind of the same!"

"Julie!" Mike immediately reprimanded her, "Don't say stuff like that! It's homophobic!"

"Oh Mike!" Jezebel muttered, rolling her eyes.

Will smiled, taking the necklace and kneeling to be at her level, "Thank you sweetie," he said softly, "It's very nice. You'll give the other to Ravi, ok?"

She nodded happily and he ruffled her hair. She went off, replaced by Shelley who made her entrance, greeting Will warmly.

They continued to the lounge and took seats on the sofa and armchairs around the coffee table covered in various appetizers Jezebel had probably been preparing the whole day. As usual, there was too much food.

"How's your mom?" Mike asked as they both settled into the couch, close by.

"Will, do you want to drink something?" Jezebel interjected.

"A whisky, if you have," he answered before turning his attention back on Mike, "She's fine. She was a bit tired with all the hospital trips but she's ok now. I'll return to Chicago at the end of the month anyway. I haven't been able to go as much as I wanted with all the touring."

"How has it been going? The touring?"

From the corner of his eye, he saw Jezebel took the bottle of Dead

Rabbit from the cabinet, their best bottle of whisky, and pour two slugs into a glass that she slid toward Will.

"Thanks Jez," he said, taking it.

Mike looked at the glass then his wife who was fixing herself a glass of Martini.

"You're not asking me what I want to drink? I want some whisky too!"

"You've drank enough already!"

He rolled his eyes, "I only had one beer!"

"Which you really didn't need!"

"I'm fine!" he said, exasperated.

She turned to Will, hands on her hips.

"Tell him, Will! Tell him he put on weight and needs to cut down on sugar and alcohol for a little while!"

Mike sighed. He hated it when she did that, when she used Will against him. Will chuckled, looking at them both with a little smirk.

"He could come run with us," he proposed.

"All the way from Hawkins?" Mike replied.

"Yeah. You take the plane from Indianapolis and in - what? - two hours you're in New York, joining us for our Sunday jog! Easy peasy!"

"Sure! I'll do that!" Mike laughed. Will winked at him and Mike felt a knot form in his gut. He turned to Jezebel instead, "Jez?!"

She huffed, "Fine, fine!" and grabbed a glass, pouring the same amount of whisky as she had for Will, "Here, have your whisky!"

He took it, "Thanks!"

"Oh, don't thank me! I'm not the one who'll die of cirrhosis!"

Beside them, Julie and Shelley sent each other a knowing look that didn't go unnoticed by any of the adults. Will smirked, shaking his head a bit. Mike brought the glass to lips, swallowed a sip and turned to Will again, ignoring Jezebel who was passing the tray of appetizers rather insistently, playing housewife as she had been taught to.

"Later, mom!" Shelley whined, "You've already proposed me three times in a minute!"

"Fine, you don't need to be rude!"

She proposed the tray to Julie who took a canopy. Will took one too with a gentle nod. Mike dismissed her with a glare, waiting for the silence to return so that he could finish his conversation with his best friend.

"So, this tour?" he asked again, "How did it go?"

Will licked the crumbs from his lips and Mike's eyes darted up and down, following the movement of his tongue. A reaction Will seemed not to notice.

"Good, good," he said, "I finished my last conference yesterday. It was a very interesting three weeks. Got to meet loads of nice people."

"Weren't you harassed too much?" Jezebel asked, presenting the tray again to Shelley who probably wished she could turn her mother to stone by the sheer force of her eyes.

He shook his head, "No. Most people are very nice. They're here to educate themselves on specific topics. Sure, you always have one insistent fan or two but usually, I turn them down and they go without a problem."

He didn't say more. He never talked about his job in front of children and always remained as evasive as possible. At the same moment, the doorbell rang and Will uncrossed his legs.

"It must be Ravi," he said.

Jezebel nodded and disappeared in the hallway to open the door. A few seconds later, a boy with black unruly hair and a leather jacket

burst into the room. It wasn't Ravi. It was Nate, Mike' son, coming back home from God knew where.

"Hi everyone," he said.

Mike blinked and jumped off the couch as if about to pounce on his son like a wolf.

"Where have you been?" he asked in a growl.

The boy didn't react. He was staring at his father with a small frown of confusion and a pout, shaking his head to remove the dark bangs from his eyes. He was the spitting image of Mike at the same age. The same black hair. The same dark eyes. The same freckles. The same tall, gangly form. The same explosive temper. They could have been clones. It was almost unsettling.

"I asked you a question," Mike insisted, gripping his glass of whisky in his fist.

The teenager's frown deepened. He sniffled and took a few chips from the bowl on the coffee table, popping them into his mouth with an air of defiance. Mike flared his nostrils, red in the face.

"I told you, Mike," Jezebel intervened, "He was at Jessie's."

Mike didn't pay his wife any heed and kept his attention locked on his son.

"You could have sent us a text! Do you know what time it is?!"

He was fuming already. On his left, Will put his hand on his arm to calm him.

"Mike..." he whispered soothingly and Mike's body began to shake from the burning touch, tingling all over.

Jezebel eyed her husband menacingly, "He did send me a text!" she said, defending her son before Mike's anger became a nuisance to her pristine dinner party.

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I told you! I told you he was at Jessie's! Not my fault you don't listen!"

The air was thick enough to cut with a knife. The two girls shook their heads with a grimace. Father and son were staring at the other like two bulls ready to charge, Jezebel in between, acting as a shield. Will wasn't moving from the couch, observing the situation from afar, sipping on his whisky.

"Please, enough you two," she whispered, "We have guests."

Mike sighed and returned to sit with a last glare at his son who glared back before turning to Will, his defiant expression replaced by a smile and a blush he was trying not to show too much.

"Hi Will."

Will moved from the couch to hug Nate warmly.

"Hey kid! It's good to see you! I swear you're even taller than the last time I saw you! Soon, you'll be taller than your dad!"

Mike choked on his drink but they ignored him.

"Sorry for the grand entrance," Nate apologized.

Will shook his head, "It's fine. Don't worry about it!"

Nate's smile widened and so did the pink hue on his cheeks. Jezebel fixed her untouched canopies, presenting the tray again, and Mike groaned in his glass of whisky.

The doorbell rang a second time.

"Ah," Jezebel said, "This time it must be Ravi."

She went off in a clicking of heels. The voice of a man rose in the hall, apologizing for being late, short of breath, sounding absolutely panicked. They all chuckled. Yes, this was Ravi. A few seconds later, she returned to the lounge with a tall bearded man with jet black hair and olive skin dressed in a black vest and light blue jeans.

"Hi," he said in a thick English accent, "I'm so sorry for being late," he went to peck Will on the lips, "Hey babe."

"Did you find the paprika your mom wanted?" Will asked.

Ravi nodded, "Yes, with much difficulty."

"Paprika?" Mike repeated.

Ravi nodded, "Every year it's the same thing. My mum wants me to bring her a special sort of Paprika with honey that she uses for cakes. And I can only find it in a small Paki store in Chicago."

"And not in England?"

"Not this one. And she wants this one. Not any other. And when she wants something, she'll pester you until she gets it."

He sat in one of the armchairs, looking positively exhausted.

"Do you want something to drink?" Jezebel asked softly.

"An ice cold beer would be wonderful!"

She turned to Shelley, currently playing on her phone. Her sister had disappeared and Nate slumped into a chair with a glass of milk, looking at the couples with rebellious disinterest.

"Shelley, can you get a beer from the fridge for Ravi?"

The teenage girl sighed but obeyed, pushing on her feet to get off the couch and go to the kitchen. The adults began to chat, Mike asking Ravi about his trip, accepting canopies from Jezebel who would have probably murdered them all if they hadn't. Nate put his empty glass on the table and licked his lips, eyes glued on Will.

"Will," he tried, his voice wavering with hesitancy, "Do you have a minute? I need your opinion on something."

Will swallowed and put his glass on the coffee table, uncrossing his legs.

"Sure thing, kiddo."

He followed the teenager out of the room. Jezebel immediately arched her brow at her husband expectantly, looking between Mike and the pair disappearing upstairs with an absurd expression. Mike frowned, shook his head and shrugged, ignoring her to respond to Ravi who accepted the beer from Shelley.

Meanwhile, Nate led Will to his room, feeling a little nervous. He had made sure to clean it well, just in case. He didn't want to pass for a slob, especially not in front of Will. He licked his lip and went to fetch something from behind his desk.

"Here," he said, producing a huge canvas, "It's a project for art class but I'm lost on the color palette. What would you choose?"

He put the canvas on the floor for Will to judge and see. It was a sketch of a deformed skeletal silhouette, its huge mouth wide open in a silent scream, the shape of a smaller silhouette pushing against its skin from the inside, as if trying to escape.

"What's the theme?" Will asked.

"Individuality," Nate answered.

Will smirked, "Looks painful."

Nate shrugged and waited as Will examined the drawing, tracing the contours with his fingers.

"You're into surrealism, eh?" he noted, "It's good. Pretty good."

The compliment went straight to Nate's heart and he bit his lip awkwardly.

"You really think so?"

"Yeah. I like it. What colors are you gonna use?"

"I was gonna go on yellow and green but I'm not sure. I'm afraid that might be too nightmarish."

"Isn't it the tone you want to set?"

Nate nodded with a shrug.

"Yellow and green sound good to me," Will continued, "But lighter on the green. And don't hesitate to insist on the contours with black to give it as much relief as possible. Adding shades of grey could be nice too," he pointed at the figure, "Here and all around here, to make it a bit of a shadow."

"Yeah, that's cool. I like the idea!" Nate agreed, smiling at the man who smiled back, "Thanks."

"My pleasure. But it's very good. You're very talented!"

Nate blushed in spite of himself, happy that Will enjoyed his hard work, and put the canvas back in its hidden place before his mother found it and gave him Hell about it - she only liked paintings with flowers and ladies in fancy dresses and if she ever saw the dark pieces he drew, she would send him either to the priest or a therapist. He didn't really know which.

"Do you still draw?" he asked Will who was looking about the room, hands buried in the pockets of his jeans. A gesture so casual for most but that gave Will an air of sophistication that always made Nate's heart beat too fast.

Will turned to look at him with a small smirk.

"Yes I do. In my leisure time. Drawing will always be a part of me."

"Will you show me some of your work someday?"

Will smiled at him, "Sure! There are stuff you might like."

Nate's lips stretched to his ears, his heart hammering in his chest joyfully, palms sweaty with too much emotion. At the same moment, Jezebel's voice rose into the corridor, calling them to dinner. Nate sighed and followed him down the stairs with a pang of disappointment. She was waiting for them at the bottom and immediately assaulted Will to know if he ate potatoes. When he answered that he did, she softened up, all smiles, and they gathered

around the table, Mike opening a good bottle of wine. As usual, there was too much food and she insisted to fill everyone's plate to the fullest.

"Will you return to England soon?" she suddenly asked Ravi, turning to look at him across the table.

Ravi swallowed his bit of chicken and wiped the corners of his mouth with his napkin, "We're going back for Aid-el-Fitr. We'll be staying in Liverpool for about a week, I think."

"Summer vacation in England, the dream!" Will ironized and his boyfriend glared at him.

"Please ignore Will," Ravi said, "He's bitter because he'll have to cohabit with my uncle Salim. They're great friends!"

"What's wrong with your uncle?" Mike asked, cutting Julie's meat in her plate.

"He's an old pig," Will spat.

"Translation," Ravi clarified with an amused smile, "He and Will don't have the same moral standards."

"He's a seventy-eight year-old pervert married to a girl almost forty years younger!" Will interjected, "She was barely legally an adult when he married her!"

"Good gracious!" Jezebel whispered, her hand stilled on her glass of wine.

Ravi sighed, "Unfortunately, the legal age to marry in my parent's country is fifteen. Iman was sixteen. So she was of age."

"Legal or not, it doesn't change the fact that it's repulsive," Will continued with a grimace, "Something must be going terribly wrong in your head if you're an adult and you marry a kid!"

"Again my love, different cultures here! Not too long ago, may I remind you that kings and queens were betrothed in the crib!"

Will dismissed Ravi's comment with a gesture of his hand, as if removing the words from the air. Silence returned for a little while as they ate and drank.

"You don't think two people with an age difference can love each other and be happy?"

Nate's question was so genuine, it surprised everyone and they all looked up from their plate to stare at him. His eyes were glued on Will with an indescribable expression.

Will blinked.

"Depends on the age gap," he answered slowly, "A few years is ok, I guess. If the two persons are already both adults then why not. But here, it's a kid with someone much, much older. Someone old enough to be their grandfather almost. It's unacceptable."

"Yeah, it's gross," Shelley said, looking at her brother as if he were an anomaly.

Nate shrugged, "Maybe this one case is. But not all."

He went back to sulking, looking stubbornly into his plate. For a long minute, all eyes were on him. Only Julie remained oblivious of the world, playing with the food on her plate. She was too small to understand what was happening around her anyway. Mike brusquely changed the subject, proposing more wine and Jezebel pushed the plate of chicken and potatoes toward Will again. The rest of the dinner went rather smoothly, the adults all chatting energetically with each other, most of them trying to politely decline Jezebel's insistence to fill their plates a fourth time. Nate was still staring down with the expression of a prisoner, regularly looking at Will and Ravi with sad eyes none of them seemed to have noticed.

After they all had their share of an enormous homemade strawberry cake, Jezebel disappeared upstairs to put Julie to bed and Shelley followed them. Mike launched a playlist of old rock music and produced some Brandy Ravi had offered them years ago from the cabinet. He filled three small glasses. Nate could have gone to his room but for some reason he chose to stay with the three men,

wallowed in the couch, eyes glued on his phone while Ravi, Mike and Will kept chatting about politics and life projects.

"About that," Ravi said, "We'll stay at Islavadora in July and with Will we were wondering if you guys wanted to tag along? The house is big enough!"

This was a huge understatement. Islavadora was their own private island between Cuba and the Floridian coast, home of a huge Spanish villa they used as a vacation house. Many parties happened there and not exactly children friendly. Mike was even sure some of their movies had been shot in those rooms and by the pool. He shuddered just thinking about it.

He swallowed his gulp, about to answer, but Nate beat him to it before he had even time to open his mouth.

"Oh say yes, dad!" he said excitedly, "Say yes!"

Mike glared at him and turned to Ravi, "Why not! I'll ask Jez about it."

Nate pulled a face and crossed his arms on his chest, "Sure, do that. She'll say no!"

Mike sighed, "Nate, I can't make a decision for the whole family without asking the approval of the other head of this family. You know that."

"You're the man of the house," Nate grumbled, "You should be the one making the decisions!"

"Hey!" Will reprimanded with a small tap, "Not cool, kid! Not cool at all. Your mom is just as entitled to make the decision for your family as your dad!"

Nate bit his lip and looked down in shame. He hated it when Will was mad at him for something. There was a moment of silent tension before Ravi decided to speak again and ease the situation as he could.

"Anyway, know that you are all very welcome!"

"Thanks Ravi."

The man nodded with a gentle smile and left the couch to go outside for a smoke. Nate followed him, apparently in need of some air as well. At the same moment, the song that was currently playing - an old Black Sabbath song - finished. After a few seconds of transition, the next one began and Mike's heart missed a beat. He could have recognized those riffs even in a coma. He rose from the couch and walked toward the fireplace, the first chords of King of the Fools filling his soul and heart and brain. As he let the surge of emotions overflow his brain, he felt Will's presence behind him and froze, his heart in the back of his throat, pounding in his head. Will's lips touched his ear, his breath damp and hot, and he began to sing along with Dee Snider.

"Look around me, all I see

Thousands of faces, wanting me

How can I lead

How can I rule

When I'm the King of the Fools"

The lyrics made even more sense now than they ever did before, which was particularly ironic. Will's body was pressed against Mike's back and Mike thought he was going to faint.

"What kind of kingdom has no throne

No crown or castle do I own

I don't have silver, gold or jewels

Yet, I'm the king

King of the fools"

He began to shake. Will's hands closed on his shoulders to ground him and he felt his body vibrate and float, closing his eyes.

"And I can't help believing
The world is on my side
No, I can't help believing in my heart
But, I can't stop this feeling
That I should run and hide
So, before I die
I'll sit and wonder why"

Will slipped his fingers slowly in his, joining their hands on this song that had been theirs and Mike remembered. He remembered all the whispers and promises. He remembered the dreams and the burning passion. He remembered into his flesh and his body arched up against Will's pelvis, mimicking the old dance it had performed so many times in the past, pulsing, breathing, wanting. He remembered who he was.

"The outside world can't understand
Just who we are or what I am
Well, we don't want their life or rules
I'll be the king, king of the fools"

He sucked a breath. Will was almost kissing his neck. Almost. Because he wasn't. It was mostly Mike losing himself, wanting things that he thought gone.

When Jezebel returned, she found the two men entangled into one another by the fireplace, eyes closed, rocking to this god awful song. She hated Twisted Sisters. Positively hated them. But her husband loved that band and their looks and their hair and their music. It was the band of his teenage years. The years that never existed to her. The years she never wanted to hear about again. But looking at the father of her children, wantonly pressed up into another man's body - especially this man and all there was about him - she felt suddenly ill

and couldn't help but be brutally reminded of the truth. Will's arms had almost encircled Mike's waist. They were oblivious to the rest of the world, as always when they were together.

The door behind her clicked and laughing voices rose. She turned to the glued pair and cleared her throat before anyone else saw them like this. The last thing she wanted was for her son to be a witness of this distasteful show. The father's sins had already made enough damage to add more confusion to the poor boy's troubled mind. They snapped back to reality, as if suddenly remembering where they were and it looked painful, especially for Mike who had the expression of a dazed comatose.

Nate and Ravi entered the room again and she took advantage of the distraction to turn the music off and shut down all unwanted memories, forcing them back to the present, to the only reality there would ever be.

Will shook his head, pulling away from Mike and Mike felt cold.

"It's getting late, babe," Ravi said, "We should go."

Will nodded with a swallow. Mike's heart constricted in his chest. Ravi hugged Jezebel goodbye, telling her the food was delicious and she cooed. Will and Mike exchanged a look and embraced each other tight.

"You'll tell me for July, ok?" Will whispered against his cheek.

Mike nodded, "I promise."

"It'd be awesome to see you."

"Yeah, it would."

The embrace seemed to last indefinitely. Eventually, the two men parted and it seemed they had left a piece of themselves stuck to the other. Ravi bid Mike goodbye and Will turned to Nate.

"You'll send me a text when your project is over?"

Nate smiled, "Sure!"

Will smiled back, "Good."

He ruffled the kid's hair as a goodbye and Nate's heart beat against his rib cage painfully. He wished he had had a hug too.

After the door had closed behind the couple, the house was deadly silent again. Nate went upstairs and Mike joined his wife to help her clean, ignoring the knots in his stomach at the thought that he wouldn't be seeing Will again before a few weeks. Distance was always so very painful. Even thirty years later.

Nor the wife nor the husband exchanged words for long minutes. Jezebel was cleaning the kitchen while Mike loaded the dishwasher in heavy silence. He didn't need to ask to know she was mad.

Silence accompanied them to bed. Mike wasn't very tired but if he lingered in the dining room alone, it would only make it worse. As expected, the moment they slipped under the sheets, she began to kiss and touch him. To reassure herself or claim him back maybe. Mike's body remained impassive and he wiggled his hips away from her too hungry mouth, as if burned.

"Not tonight, Jez," he said, "I'm tired."

He felt her tense against him for a second and she moved to her side.

"Of course... You're never in the mood after you've seen him."

He sighed, "Please don't start. It's late and I'm tired."

"You're always tired."

"Please don't."

The light switched off as they both laid in oppressive silence, their bodies not touching. He closed his eyes and tried to convey happy, comforting thoughts. A messy dorm covered in posters, a concert, hidden kisses in closed booth. Half returned to images of the past, he heard Jezebel get off the bed and go to the bathroom to take her pills. He wanted to feel bad but was locked inside his own body and brain, oblivious to the pain of others. Oblivious to the fact that in the room that used to be his, a fifteen year-old boy was happily dreaming

with the hope of spending an entire month in the house of the one he adored.

And Mike fell asleep, hugging his pillow